

Advent 20

GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY

Advent 2009

GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY

IN MEMORY OF
DR. DANIEL E. GOODMAN
1968-2009

“The worst thing is not the last thing.”

These words offered to us by Frederick Buechner are easy enough to write here. They have not been so easy for some of us to believe this year.

The Gardner-Webb Advent Guide has been produced since 2005 by Dr. Dan Goodman. Our campus community was shocked by Dan's death in January. He was a young man with much energy and great promise. We will never truly know the full measure of our loss in the Gardner-Webb community. We know only a small part of the loss for Dan's wife, Barbara, and two sons, Daniel and Dylan.

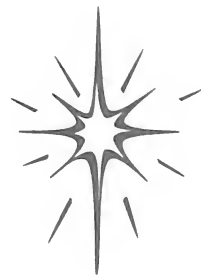
I first met Dan Goodman in 1995 in West Palm Beach, Florida. We began our teaching careers together, and over the course of the intervening years we became friends. We both rejoiced when Providence smiled on us and allowed our professional lives to intersect again at Gardner-Webb. Even now, after almost a year, I am still unable to put to words the depth of my loss and bereavement. I know that I am not alone in my grief.

Our community has known more than its share of sorrows over the past 18 months. Individually and collectively we have walked through the valley of the shadow of death. And in many of those moments, it has been hard to believe—deep down inside—that the worst thing is not the last thing. It has been hard, at times, to hope.

The wisdom of our ancestors is with us in the calendar of the Church. Through the passing of the seasons and the retracing of the ancient cycle, we are reminded of the truths of our faith. Advent is the circle complete. It is both ending and beginning. It is both beginning and ending. Advent begins the Christian year as we remember God's promises that are fulfilled in the Incarnation. But, Advent is also the culmination of the Christian year as we remember God's promises that are yet to be fulfilled. We look forward to that moment when God will act again and make all things new. It is this hope, that God will redeem the world, which sustains our belief that “the worst thing is not the last thing.”

We offer this collection of reflections to you as a sign of this hope and in memory of Dr. Daniel Goodman. We hope that the guide will enrich your life during the Advent season.

There are many people who, each year, work to create the Advent guide. Thank you to Dr. Sheri Adams and Dr. Danny West who served as co-editors with me for the guide, the gifted writers who have shared from their wisdom and experience, campus administrators who support the production of the guide, and our printer who takes great care and pride in producing the guide. We all express our heartfelt thanks to you, the reader, who supports us in our work and ministry here at Gardner-Webb University. We wish you a meaningful and hopeful holiday season.



THE LAST THING

ADVENT AT
GARDNER-WEBB
2009

T. Perry Hildreth

Associate Professor
of Philosophy



HOPE

SUNDAY,
NOVEMBER 29

Jeremiah 33:14-16
Luke 21:25-36

Larry George

Associate Professor of
New Testament Interpretation
School of Divinity

For whatever reason, some would like to have peace and redemption to come without conditions, without strings attached. They simply want peace for peace's sake and redemption without a sacrifice. This is not a bad thing; it is simply not according to the rule of God. The Lord, however, seeks perfect peace and redemption at a great cost, an ultimate cost to Jesus Christ and an equitable cost to us. The cost to Jesus was his life. The cost to us, however, is justice, fairness to all—to those that have and to those that have not, to the rich and to the poor. However, some may shun such a proposition, yet peace and redemption always come at a price and with conditions.

When the Logos becomes flesh and dwells among us, God gives us the greatest gift of all. However one sees it, the incarnate God dwelling among us comes to set this record straight and goes to those who need the Lord the most—the captives, the blind, those imprisoned, those who experienced loss, and those who were disenfranchised and placed on the margins of the society. The Lord comes to set us free from the injustices of the world and to place us in a right relationship with God and humanity. This was God's plan from the beginning that we would live in peace, in shalom, with God and each other. Such peace cannot exist without justice. Repeatedly, God reminds Israel to care for the widows, orphans, and strangers because they too were considered as such. We cannot expect peace if we neglect the

cry of the hungry, the moans of the homeless, and the tears of innocent children and elderly. For the redeemed to be truly at peace, there must be justice and justice must be for all.

During this Advent season, Christians should take additional time to address the needs of the oppressed. It is then that we will experience a peace that surpasses all knowledge, and it is then that we will reap the full benefits of being called the redeemed. Jesus Christ came to sacrifice his life for us so that the life that we live could be lived in such a way as to exchange our priorities with His. Indeed, He came to take our place so that we could take His, to bring glad tidings and the gospel to those who walk in a world filled with injustices. Paul says it best: "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So the life I now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Let us do the same.

It was almost time for final exams, and Emily was determined to try and make up for lost time, time she had squandered away earlier in the semester by getting caught up in the campus social life in lieu of applying herself to her studies. There was always something to do, somewhere to go, and time quickly slipped away while hanging out with friends.

Although she had initially fallen behind in several classes, Emily soon realized that she needed to examine her priorities and manage her time more effectively so her studies would not continue to suffer. She had done pretty well getting back on track to balance schoolwork with other activities; however, there was still one class in which she continued to have difficulty. It had come to this—if she did not make an A on the final exam, she would lose her academic scholarship.

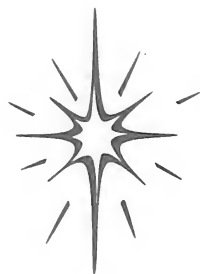
As Emily walked around the library trying to choose a place to study, she spotted a study group from her class at a back table. Deeply engrossed in their conversation, they did not see her. She paused for a moment and sighed. This group had been meeting all semester and had invited her to join them several times, but she had always had “better things” to do and declined. Those “better things” did not seem so important now as she realized that these were the students who were making the best grades in her class. She could have been among them.

As she started to turn away, one of the members of the group looked up and spotted her. Waving at her, Jeremy pointed to an empty chair at the table. When the others turned and smiled at her in approval, Emily felt warmed at their acceptance. Even though they had stopped asking her to join them, she realized that they would still welcome her as part of the group.

With a quick nod and smile, Emily walked lightheartedly over to the empty chair to join them. This may be just what she needed to help strengthen her understanding of the subject so that she would be better prepared for the test!

In Romans 14-15, we find Paul addressing the church in Rome to welcome those who want to join them, even though these newcomers faith may be weak. He encourages those strong in faith not to be judgmental of the weak for their differing ideas of right and wrong, but rather to be loving, patient, and to help “build them up.” Paul stresses unity of Jew and Gentile joining together into the fellowship of the church. The Body of Christ is comprised of believers from every nationality and race, the rich and the poor, those weak in faith and those strong, Jew and Gentile, and those with differing opinions of right and wrong.

Now in this Advent season, as we prepare our hearts and minds for the celebration of His coming, this message is clear: Christ came for all!



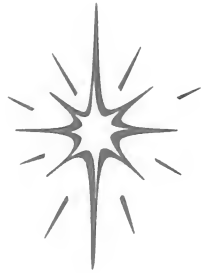
HOPE

MONDAY,
NOVEMBER 30

Isaiah 2:1-5
Romans 15:7-13

Mary Thompson

Public Services Librarian



HOPE

TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 1

Isaiah 11:1-10
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Mark Hughes

Vice President of Enrollment
Management

Perhaps you have heard the story about the mouse and the mousetrap? Upon discovering a mousetrap at the farm where he lived, the mouse began to alert his fellow farm animals. He told the chicken, the pig, and the cow. Of course, he was greatly concerned, but all his fellow animals could not understand how his problem was their problem. So, all the other farm animals dismissed his concern as a problem that did not affect them.

One night, a poisonous snake crawled into the house and was caught in the trap. The farmer's wife, in the dark, went to retrieve the trap and was bitten by the snake. She became quite ill and, in addition to medical care, the farmer decided that he should prepare some chicken soup to assist her recovery. Of course, chicken soup required that he kill the chicken. The farmer's wife did not improve and many of her friends arrived to visit her. In order to feed them, the farmer decided to kill the pig. Eventually, the farmer's wife died. Many people came to mourn her death, and the farmer decided that he must kill the cow to be able to feed all of his guests. The little mouse who had initially sounded the alarm watched quietly in great sadness.

The lesson of this story is clear: The problems of others that I do not believe affect me may, in the end, be my own undoing. Our lives are more connected than we may immediately recognize. The scriptures exhort us to bear one another's burdens. While we should do this all

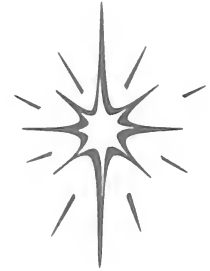
through the year, there are many reminders during the holiday season that we should reach out in compassion toward our neighbor and the stranger in need. May God make us sensitive to the needs of others.

It's finally December! Can we *please* play the Christmas music now?" we asked. As children, growing up in Pennsylvania, my mother would never let us start playing or listening to Christmas music until November was over. We never decorated our tree until Christmas Eve. Mom always wanted the magical anticipation of Christmas to be as fresh and alive as possible. It worked! We went to sleep (or tried to), having not seen the tinsel or lights on the tree. In the morning, that sparkling scene never disappointed. Years later, the anticipation of seeing our own children come down the steps with Christmas wonder in their eyes gave me even more reason to look forward to this celebrated Holy morning. I wonder, as our Heavenly Father watches us, if He, too, longs to see the anticipation in our eyes and hearts as we celebrate the true reason for this season.

Advent...the arrival of our Messiah! Yes, we celebrate Christmas, Christ's first arrival, but we all, as Christians, can anticipate with great hope His second coming. Our text from Isaiah 35, reminds us to have expectant hope in God's promise. The parched desert will burst into bloom and the weak will be strengthened. The blind will see and the deaf will hear. I have faith, that whatever our struggles, He will meet our needs and restore us as well. He wants to lead us to the highway of holiness where we can experience everlasting joy, peace, and harmony. This year if your heart is heavy with the untimely

loss of a loved one, a change of career forced by a challenging economy, a relentless illness, or the disappointment of a broken relationship, take heart...He who can heal us all, is coming back to take us in His precious and loving arms! Until that perfect time, we must seek His wisdom and join Him in His work. "O come, O come, Emmanuel...."

I wish you and your family a blessed and joyous Christmas season. As we shop and bustle with holiday preparations, let's not forget our gift to God.



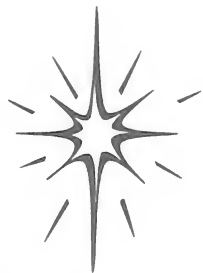
HOPE

WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 2

Isaiah 35:1-10
Matthew 3:1-12

Franki Burch

Professor of Physical Education



HOPE

THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 3

Psalm 146:5-10
James 5:7-10

Kathy Naish

Student
School of Divinity

This has been a hard year for many people. The economic shifts that happened in our country created aftershock and then more aftershock as people began losing jobs. Unemployment now threatens the vines and orchards of our days. Financial loss has stalked us and we've seen our crops fail, the fields where we have planted our security.

This has been a hard year for many people. Grief has shaken the foundations of home and family and sometimes faith has trembled, stalked by anger and fear. Deep sadness threatens the garden, the places where we have sewn our hope.

This has been a hard year for many people. We live in a mobile society and for one reason or another, people have had to pull up the roots of their lives and relocate. All that is familiar withers and stress threatens the seeds of what we have called home.

The list goes on and on. This has been a hard year for many people. In a time when little has been sure, metaphors that bring our hearts back to the earth, back to the basic rhythm of the seasons, remind us how to wait. The imagery calls us to the comfort of sun and rain, of soil and seed, of planting and reaping.

"The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the

early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near." The words from James call us to wait for the coming of the Lord the way we wait for rain on the fields. Both will come.

Wait. The seasons will turn. The hard year will give way to a new future. The early and late rains will come and we will put our hands into the soil again.

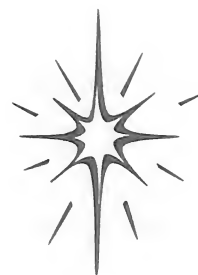
Wait. A baby will come. Advent will end in birth. Christ will come with the early and the late rains. In the midst of the fear, in the midst of the grief, in the midst of the stress, Christ will come. So it is that even in a hard year, we give our hearts to the task of waiting, for love will be born. Strengthen your hearts; the coming of the Lord is near.

I met Fermin on my first mission trip to the Dominican Republic in 2005. He was 22 years old at the time and was a leader in the youth group in the village of Bombita. His singing voice was the most unique and angelic I had ever heard as he poured out his soul to God in a language whose words I could not understand, but whose spirit I connected with immediately. Fermin's powerful soul exists within a frail, less than healthy body. I was told that his health was failing and his long-term prospects were bleak. A friend and I were granted the privilege of placing our hands on him and praying for him after the meeting. In that holy moment, I experienced an overwhelming sense of God's presence and power.

When I returned to the Dominican 4 years later, I made sure to visit Fermin's village in hopes of seeing him again. The years in between had not been kind to Fermin physically, but his spirit and faith were stronger than ever. Just before our visit, he had led a group of hundreds of teenagers at a youth rally as their praise and worship leader. When his youth group finished singing for us that day, I asked again if I could pray with Fermin. This time I also requested that he pray for me. Remembering James 5:16, I recognized that the prayers of this righteous man of God would be powerful and effective in my own life.

I was made aware that Fermin's time on earth was tenuous. Due to the inoperable nature of his disease, he was given a maximum of 4 to 5 more years to live. Knowing that, I asked how I might pray for him. He replied through the interpreter that he wouldn't ask me to pray for his health because it was not a concern of his. His focus was striving to become stronger in his faith each day and becoming a more committed follower of Christ during his remaining time on earth.

Fermin's testimony is an excellent reminder to me during Advent of the hope of the coming Christ. Jesus came into the world so that humans might win the victory over sin and death. Fermin has claimed this victory. Fermin is aware that the victory has already been won. Our best days are always ahead of us if we realize the victory has been achieved through the birth and sacrificial death of our Savior. The celebration of Christmas reminds us of that hope we have for the future—a hope that I was reminded of as Fermin prayed for me last summer on my mission trip. This righteous young man has inspired me to treat each day as a precious gift. And by doing so, like Fermin, I can lift my eyes to the hills from where my help comes and celebrate the hope of the Christmas season every day.



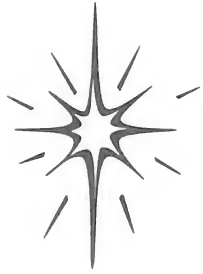
HOPE

FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 4

Amos 2:6-16
Matthew 11:2-11

Rusty Stroup

Head Baseball Coach
Instructor in Sociology



HOPE

SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 5

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
Matthew 1:18-25

Rachel Adams

Undergraduate Student

I remember telling my mother once that I had figured out how to get away with doing whatever I wanted. In retrospect, that was probably not the right conversation to have with a parent. She, however, just asked what I meant. What I had “realized” was that each time I did something bad, I could just ask for forgiveness. I could continually do what I wanted, ask for forgiveness later, and everything would be fine. That, as she explained to me, is not the true meaning of forgiveness or mercy. The true meaning lies in love.

When I first read the passages I was given for this piece, I was instantly reminded of that story. In Psalm 80, the nation of Israel laments their misfortune and begs God to redeem them. They bemoan the fact that they are the “scorn of [their] neighbors” and the laughingstock of their enemies. God brought them out of Egypt and gave them everything they needed—why then did God take it away? Their eagerness is conditional, however; they ask for restoration in return for their faithfulness. There is hope in this passage, but it is the desperate hope of those who do not trust in the mercy of their beloved. They must have something concrete in return for so intangible a gift. I wondered why this was so—the God I knew was continually kind, merciful, and loving. My God would not have hesitated to reconnect.

The crux, I realized, was that the people of Israel had no basis of comparison for the scope of God’s

love for humanity. And love is the point, although our humanness sometimes limits our ability to express it in its entirety. God, however, was able to show us the true scope of an unending love in the form of Christ. In the passage in Matthew, an angel appears to Mary and tells her to name her baby Jesus, because “he will save his people from their sins.” To me, the real gift comes later: “They shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’” That phrase sums it up for me. Nothing in life is ever certain. The only thing I am continually sure of is that there is a force that guides me and is with me every second—and that force is Love.

"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness."

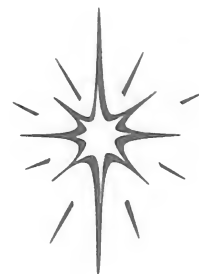
On a crisp fall Sunday morning in 1983, I listened as Dr. Dan Kent, Professor of Old Testament at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, began his sermon by reading the words I used to begin this reflection. I had been married only a few months and struggling with an important decision. My husband, at that point, had already spent roughly 15 years as a missionary in South America and wanted to return for the remainder of his work life. There was much about the prospect that was appealing—living abroad, learning another language, getting to really know people in another part of the world, teaching in a seminary, hopefully traveling. There was also much that did not appeal—living so far from family and friends, missing out on so many Christmases and family occasions, the prospect of experiencing political instability.

Most importantly, though, I had not experienced what I considered a "call" to missions. One of my New Testament professors had made the statement that we didn't need a call when we had a command to go into all the world, but that was not of much help when everyone, particularly the Foreign Mission Board, expected me to have experienced a call.

I listened to the sermon that morning as Dan took each of the names mentioned in the text except John, son of Zechariah, and briefly did a biography of each man. It was hard to believe that only seven men could have experienced that much turmoil in their lives. Most of the politicians were stubborn and cruel, in the game for what was in it for them personally, and willing to do whatever it took to achieve their personal goals, including the murder of family, even wives and sons. Most died violent deaths. As one historian put it of one of the men, "Few would have wept at his death."

Unfortunately, the religious men were not much better. It was in Caiaphas' house that Jesus' death was plotted. "Better for one man to die..." he said. It was the two of them who turned Jesus over to Pilate. Later the two of them had Peter and John beaten for preaching about Jesus.

Finally Dan talked about John and what God was able to do with a person like John, whose heart was open to hear God's call and who was willing to do what God was asking the person to do. I felt that my heart was open, and I felt that I was willing to do what God was asking me to do. In that willingness, the call I needed came. By the end of 1984, Bob and I were in Buenos Aires, Argentina where we spent roughly a decade and I learned, as one friend put it, "to speak 'missionary.'"



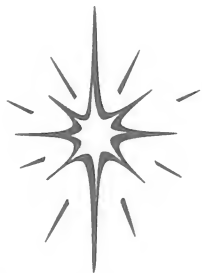
PEACE

SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 6

Malachi 3:1-4
Luke 3:1-6

Sheri Adams

Professor of Theology
and Christian History
School of Divinity



PEACE

MONDAY,
DECEMBER 7

Nahum 1:15
James 3:18

Scott Bell

Student
School of Divinity

Martha Mason passed away this year. She was a graduate of Gardner-Webb and a truly amazing woman. From the time she was 11, she lived in an iron lung for a total of 61 years. Her life was filled with successes. She was an author and an academician. In recent years she concluded that her life had been good, but her conclusion was not a Pollyannaish fantasy. Aside from the obvious difficulties of being immobile, later in Martha's life her mother suffered a series of strokes that led to dementia and abusive behavior. Martha was honest about her struggles. In a 2003 interview with the Charlotte Observer, she said, "I'm happy with who I am, where I am. I wouldn't have chosen this life, certainly. But given this life, I've probably had the best situation anyone could ask for."

It is readily evident that Martha was at peace. She painted for us an accurate representation of the Christian understanding of peace. Most individuals cannot understand the kind of peace that Martha had. It is an illogical peace. It simply does not make sense. How can Christians have peace when they face so many difficulties in life? In many respects, Christians are just like the rest of humanity. They have physical problems. They suffer from depression and anxiety. They experience difficulties in relationships, and yet they consider life to be incredibly rewarding and worth living.

Christian peace is not found in beautiful places. It is not found in the glory and splendor of cool rugged peaks in the Rocky Mountains or

warm and windswept sandy Hawaiian beaches. Tragedy can strike anywhere. Peace cannot be associated with how much money is in our bank accounts, mutual funds, and 401(k)s. By now we have all realized how quickly those can disappear. If all these things are true, how can there actually be peace in our lives?

The Bible teaches that peace is found in a person. This person is the God-man who is Jesus Christ. In the Hebrew Bible, he is called the Prince of Peace. When we begin to follow him and develop a relationship with him, our lives can actually become more tumultuous. Additional demands and expectations are placed upon Christians. Once again, we must remember that peace is not dependent on external factors. Our peace is an illogical peace. It is the kind of peace that surpasses all understanding. Christian peace comes from knowing that as we serve an eternal God, our lives have an eternal purpose. Our lives are not lived in vain. Christian peace also comes when God's indescribable presence is supernaturally felt in our lives. Furthermore, knowing that one has a relationship with the God of Creation puts one's problems in perspective.

If God can grant peace and prosperity to Martha Mason, he can give it to you too. This Christmas, let us focus on Jesus Christ as the Prince of Peace, and let us allow him to superimpose his peace on our lives.

We live today in a time marked by growing paranoia. Most of us were brought up on the conviction that we live in the biggest, the best, and the strongest country in the world, but our confidence has recently been shaken by economic, ideological, and military threats. Instead of pulling together with other believers, some Christians use scare tactics based on both old and new prejudices and fears to demonize “the other side” and get their own way. They declare “spiritual warfare” not on Satan but against other Christians. Today it is easy for all kinds of Christians to give in to pessimism and paranoia.

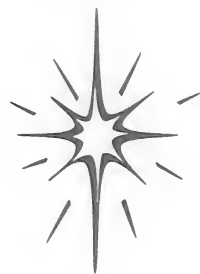
Today’s passages, Ezekiel 37:26-28 and Galatians 5:22-23, are embedded in messages that offer strikingly different and hopeful views of reality.

Ezekiel’s hearers were people whose worst fears had been realized—they were conquered people living in exile from their beloved homeland. They were convinced that their whole nation was as dead as were their soldiers whose broken, dry bones lay scattered across ancient battlefields. We smile with recognition as we hear God’s dramatic message that the dry bones could live again, but we forget the simple story that followed. It was an object lesson using two sticks. God told Ezekiel to write “for Judah” on one of them, and “for Joseph (the stick of Ephraim)” on the other. These were the two parts of their country that had for hundreds of years remained apart after a civil war. Finally, enemies had destroyed both of them. Ezekiel was told to hold the sticks together before the

people and announce that God would unite these warring political systems under a Davidic ruler. Even more important, he said (vs. 23), God would save them from all the apostasies into which they had fallen, and would cleanse them. “Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God.”

When we Christians read Ezekiel’s words, we remember the coming of Jesus and how early Christians reinterpreted such passages about “my servant David,” “one shepherd,” “a covenant of peace,” and “an everlasting covenant” (vs. 24 and 26).

Despite these beautiful words, we believers in Christ can find living in freedom and hope to be uncomfortable. Like the people in Galatia in Paul’s time, some of us long for legalistic certainties, while others wonder if giving into immorality must not be more fun than the kind of faithfulness and self-control inspired by Jesus. Paul reminds all of us that the Jewish hope described in Ezekiel for a settled, fruitful life can find fulfillment now in lives planted in Jesus and bearing the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience (tolerance that means putting up with people), kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. What a wonderful alternative this kind of life is to the hateful, aggressive, impatient, and unkind world that is all around us. In this season when we remember again what Jesus came to make possible, may we balance guarding our freedom in Christ with cultivating in our lives the fruits of His Spirit.



PEACE

TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 8

Ezekiel 37:26-28
Galatians 5:22-23

Robert Lamb

Dean Emeritus
School of Divinity



PEACE

WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 9

Isaiah 55:12-13
Romans 8:1-6

Kelly Brame

Coordinator of Leadership and
Volunteerism

By nature, I am not a particularly joyful person. I tend toward the melancholy, having more of an affinity for the musical ballad rather than the upbeat dance. Whether I came out of the womb like this or life's circumstances affected me as such, I am not sure. As Forrest Gump suggests, perhaps it is a little bit of both happening at the same time. I have never considered joy a resource readily available at my disposal. As much as I may see myself as a pessimistic, cynical realist, it is not a mindset I cherish. In fact, joy is something I long for in my life. I would love to experience more bliss, laughter, hope, smiles, optimism, and indeed deep joy.

Years ago, I had the opportunity to backpack for several weeks with a group of young men in the Cascade Mountains of Washington. It happened to be fall, my favorite season, and the landscape was bursting forth in song. I remember trekking onto a valley where the aspen trees were adorned with brilliant yellow leaves. The trees were screaming at me with excitement, crying out as it were with praise, thanksgiving, and joy. And so it was with the rest of that trip...the wonder and amazement of mountains and hills bursting into song, the trees of the fields clapping their hands. It was a shot of joy in the arm. "I am Who I am" can inspire joy in a heart that too quickly gets bogged down with the day-in and day-out details of life. To a soul that lives more often than not in a cold, colorless winter, perpetual reminders of joy are needed—Christ's redemptive power, healing

touches; gifts of grace, mercy, unconditional love—signs born for me, no more apparent than in the fall.

We have much to struggle with if we do not struggle with much. Young men on that trip were specifically struggling with substance abuse and lives torn apart. I still hope for some realization of joy for those young men, older now, if still alive. I hope for some gift of joy for you, amidst whatever is happening in your life. I hope for some realization of the gift of joy for those of us who, like those in Isaiah 55, are thirsty, have no money, labor for that which does not satisfy...or perhaps even battle inherently for our soul's pardon, freedom, joy, and peace. May we seek and find Joy while Joy may be found.

Bob was always there for me. He loved me for who I was and will always be dear to my heart. My husband's father, Bob, my sweet father-in-law and my son's "Grandsire" was one of the most supportive, kindhearted and loving men, I have ever known. He always had an encouraging word for me and I never felt like an in-law. He treated me as his daughter and I knew he loved me. He had a unique way of making each family member feel they were the "most" special and I was no exception.

He lived about an hour away and would make his weekly visits to see us and other family members. I know that sometimes he came just to see our sons. He would often show up, knock on the door and ask if the boys were ready for a treat. He would then take them up the road for burgers and ice cream at a nearby grill. Alex and Tyler, our young sons, felt the love that their grandfather had for them. They felt safe and secure in his presence and had a deep bond with him.

I will never forget the moment and how I felt when that dreadful call came with news that Bob had had an aneurism and was nonresponsive. That evening in December of 1995, Bob, Dad, "Grandsire," left this world and was in the presence of God. About 3 weeks after his death, I walked into our oldest son's room and could hear him sobbing. I found him curled up on the floor beside his bed, his face wet with tears.

I pulled him up, held him tightly and asked him, "What's the matter, Alex?" and he said, "I miss Grandsire." It was then I realized the pain, sadness, and loss that my 10-year-old son was feeling. I wanted to take that sorrow away, but I, too, had the same feelings. We prayed for the comfort and peace that only the Lord could give.

The Lord continues to provide healing, restoration and peace throughout our lives. We are to pursue that peace and share it with those around us. May we be an example for those who need to see God, feel God and then come to know God. Let us know that in our times of darkness, God is there to pull us up and hold us tightly and comfort us. May you be blessed with His peace, the peace that passes all understanding during this special season of your life.



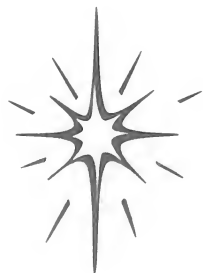
PEACE

THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 10

Jeremiah 33:6-9
Hebrews 12:14

Teresa Davis

Secretary to the
Office of Campus Ministries



PEACE

FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 11

Isaiah 26:12-13
1 Peter 3:8-12

Martha Tate

Housekeeping

Following Christ is not a part-time way of living. Sometimes we can fall into a trap of only obeying God at certain times. Our Christian walk is not something we take a vacation from on certain days or just depend on when sickness happens in our lives or the lives of someone we love.

Reading our Bible and worshiping God never gets old or boring. As we look around us we can see the greatness God has provided for us. The greatest gift from God is the peace we carry in our hearts.

Because of the price that Christ paid, we have a larger purpose in life which is to reflect Christ to the world around us. We must give God the praise for all that we accomplish in life. We

must share His peace with others. People that have other gods or those who worship material things have no peace.

Our family relationships can show others that God helps families to live in harmony. We can give God the proper thanks for all that we accomplish in life and let others know how much we depend on God each day.

Because his guidance helps us through life, may we pray that God will help us to reflect His peace and love to a hurting world.

As we continue our week of reflections about Peace, we celebrate the Advent of Christ. But today we Christians also have company in our celebrations. Today is the first day of Hanukkah. Hanukkah is the Jewish festival that celebrates the re-dedication of the temple by Judas Maccabeus and his brothers. Three years earlier, the Seleucid King Antiochus IV had desecrated the holy temple, sacrificing swine on the altar, burning books of Torah, even killing Jewish mothers who had their sons circumcised. After 3 years of resistance that finally culminated in Jewish independence, Judas and his brothers returned to the temple, only to find the temple in neglect and disrepair: "There they saw the sanctuary desolate, the altar profaned, and the gates burned. In the courts they saw bushes sprung up as in a thicket...they saw also the chambers of the priests in ruins." (I Maccabees 4:38)

Judas appointed men to cleanse the sanctuary and build a new altar for God. After re-lighting the temple, burning incense, placing bread on the table once more, and repairing the curtains, the people came back to the temple to offer sacrifice and to celebrate the temple's restoration: "It was dedicated with songs and harps and lutes and cymbals. All of the people fell on their faces and worshipped and blessed Heaven." (I Maccabees 4:54-55)

Today's Advent reading from Psalm 30 preserves a similarly celebratory moment: "You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have

taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy." Mourning is not an evil thing, we must remember. Judas Maccabee "mourned with great lamentation" at the sight of the temple's dilapidation, as he surely should have. Elsewhere in Scripture we read that there is a season for every activity in life, even a season for mourning. And when we mourn, if we are mourning well, then we do indeed dress ourselves in sackcloth, for putting on anything else would be untrue to our spirit's mourning.

And in our mourning, of course, God draws near to us again. "Weeping may linger for the night," our Psalm reads, "but joy comes in the morning." From mourning to morning. From morning to dancing. We dance today because, as the world mourned for its restoration, God sent Christ to lift the mourning and cover the world with salvation. We dance because God always hears the people's mourning—from the suffering of the Hebrews in Egypt, to the weeping of the prophets in exile, to the lamentations of Judas and his brothers at the sight of God's sanctuary in shambles. And we dance because God always seeks to save us from our mourning. So might we rejoice with God today as we remember, alongside those remembering Hanukkah, all the times in our lives when God saved us from our mourning and set us free to dance. And those losses for which we still mourn, let us take joy in the knowledge that God draws near to us in our mourning and, we hope and trust, seeks to save us again and again. (2000)

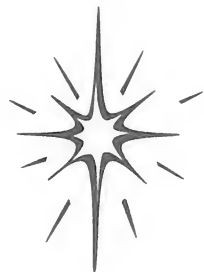


PEACE

SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 12

Psalm 30
John 14:23-27

Dan Goodman



JOY

SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 13

Zephaniah 3:14-20
Luke 3:7-18

Danny West

Executive Director of the
Doctor of Ministry Program
Associate Professor of
Preaching and Pastoral Studies
School of Divinity

Here we are at the midway point of Advent remembrance. Every year at this time the people of God find themselves caught “twixt and tween” the anticipation of the season. For some the days pass quickly; for others they move as slowly as sap on a winter day. I have discovered, however, that it is good to stop at the midpoint of any journey. It is good to take stock and evaluate the surroundings. Is it time to make a course adjustment or not? What would we change in the journey even if we could? The halfway mark is a good place to ponder some things.

In part the dilemma is this: none of us is very good at this waiting thing and yet at the core of Advent remembrance is this messy notion of waiting and anticipation. It has always been so for the people of God. Throughout biblical and faith history there is this uncomfortable idea of waiting on God and waiting on others. Nowhere is that waiting more intensely pronounced than in this season of Advent anticipation. Advent, in its purest form, is about the longing, aching of the soul for that which God has promised.

The waiting is not easy; quite frankly, none of us waits very well or patiently. We twiddle our thumbs, we shuffle our feet and look at the calendar. Anxious and impatient we wait. These are the days of Holy waiting. While we don’t relish the wait, it is in the quietness and stillness of the moment that God does some of his best work in our lives.

Zephaniah and John the Baptist knew a thing or two about waiting. Each stood in the long line of faith-driven waiters. Zephaniah waited for fulfillment from afar; John could reach out and touch his longing and yet his waiting remained. So close...yet so far!

It is much like this awkward day that we pause to remember and anticipate. Our lives are stuck in the tangled traffic of the season. We dare not go back but we cannot go forward. It is time to pull over, take a moment to collect our thoughts, and assess the Advent journey thus far.

We are getting closer but we are not there yet. As a “not yet” people, we remember in hope and set our hearts to the One who comes to fulfill our longing...even Jesus Christ the Lord.

My grandma is what some people would call a firecracker. You wouldn't know it to look at her. She's about 5 feet tall, a sharp dresser—all seersucker suits, and cornsilk powder, and a dab of Polo (which she wears behind each ear because it reminds her of my grandfather). She keeps her hair just so and hides her hazel eyes behind jumbo Jackie-O sunglasses.

She has taught me practical things like how to get stains out of clothes or how to write a thank you note, and less practical things, like how to choose a shade of lipstick that doesn't make you look like a vampire (unfortunately this is a lesson I learned after my senior prom). But it is the important things, like how to love and cherish someone who is dying, or how to honor someone who has passed on that I know I will return to throughout my life. When I am a mother, or if I am lucky, a grandmother, I want to teach the children in my life what I learned from Hunna about joy.

When I was very young, anytime I had a recital or a graduation, Hunna would say: "I will be the one who stands up and says, 'That's my granddaughter.'" And as I got older, she added on. "I will be the one who stands up and points to you and hollers, 'There. Right there. That one. THAT'S MY GRANDDAUGHTER!'" When I entered junior high school, she began to add on the clothes. It started with a pair of red, knee-length boots, and as the years passed, the story got more elaborate. By the time I graduated high school, the speech went something like: "I'm going to wear my knee-high red boots, and my leather mini-skirt, and a leopard-print shirt, and my fish-net stockings,

and my fur coat and loads and loads of liquid eyeliner and bright red lipstick, and I'm going to stand up and point at you: 'Abby! Abby!' I will say. And I will look around and say 'That's my granddaughter!'" At the end of the story comes the laughter. We would laugh and laugh. And my grandmother's laughter is one of the seven wonders of my world.

Remember that Hunna is pretty introverted. Remember too that she has never owned anything with animal prints, or fur, or leather or fishnet. This is a woman who sticks to neutrals, who can light up the room in a crisp white oxford and a pair of black polyester pants. So imagine my surprise when I walked into my undergraduate graduation and there she was sitting right up front in a pair of red high-heeled boots and a mink collar. I broke out of the formal line of march to hug her. You can guess what she whispered.

Hunna continues to teach me that unlike happiness, joy is something liminal. It is momentary. And there is surrender involved, a decision to feel the flutter of euphoria, to recognize that the moment that you are in is crackling with beauty or love or laughter or sorrow. My prim Hunna decided to go to Goodwill. She decided to buy those red boots. She put them on. "That's my grandmother."

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice.

Put on your red boots. Be here now. I dare you.



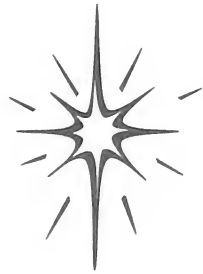
JOY

MONDAY,
DECEMBER 14

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Philippians 4:4-7

Abby Nance

Instructor in
Language and Literature



JOY

TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 15

Exodus 15:20-21
Luke 5:33-39

Sharon Decker

Student
School of Divinity

It was 10:45 on Sunday morning. Bob and our oldest son, Rob, had made it in time for Sunday School at 10:00 a.m. But, here only 15 minutes from the start of worship service, I was still struggling to get Matt, Abby, and Em to the church on time.

One by one, as I picked a few more cat hairs off my black suit, each of the three filed to the front door. Matt was looking pretty good, even without his belt. At least his hair was combed. Abby was pretty as a picture, hot pink and purple finger nails and all. Then came Emily, age 3, picture perfect, until I reached her feet—Barbie high heels complete with pink plastic feathers and sequins! Never mind that her dress was red or that it was October or even that we were headed to church, not play school! She was determined to wear those shoes. I briefly tried to reason with her that the shoes were inappropriate for church, that her feet would get cold, that they didn't match her red dress. To no avail, she won, and off we went, Emily, with a proud grin beyond description, and her mom, with a disgusting sneer.

What a sight we must have been! Yes, the ushers noticed; yes, the lady in the next row noticed; and yes, even the elderly gentleman whom I have never heard say a word noticed. Without exception, each person that greeted Em that day smiled and complimented her on how lovely she looked. Unlike me, they didn't seem to mind the clanking of the Barbie shoes against the slate church floor, which kept me from hearing a word of the sermon. And later,

after church, even the waitress at the restaurant where we went to eat lunch thought they were the prettiest shoes she had ever seen.

Slowly, but surely, as Em's confidence grew, my anxiety began to melt. Miss Em had successfully made a fashion statement that Sunday morning in her own unique way. And God had a few wonderful lessons for me in Em's pink heels which had left an indelible, yet loud, mark on all the folks in church that day. You know, as well-meaning parents and friends, we sometimes attach a great deal of significance to those things in life that are, well, actually not that significant at all, except, of course, to a precious little 3-year-old girl, who quite simply, just wanted to feel like a princess that day. Later that week, I thanked God, that even in my fit of exasperation, I allowed her that moment. God spoke to me in a note of encouragement and joy which I received in the mail from a dear lady in our congregation: "Dear Sharon, thanks for letting Emily wear her pink shoes on Sunday. I've smiled about it all week."

In this time of Advent and Holiday preparation, I am prone to create a much too long "to do" list and to schedule way too many activities. I find joy in little and anguish in much, particularly when plans don't work out as expected. It is important to remember that this should be a time of celebration and joy, not a time of over commitment and exhaustion. When you feel inclined to drop in a heap or scream as your "last nerve" is pricked, pull out a tambourine and dance instead...joy is ours for the choosing!

“The question is not ‘if’ I will go to college,” I told my peers as we chatted in the school cafeteria, “the question is ‘where?’” My lunch mates might not have known how to spend their next 4 years, but my decision about college had been made well before my senior year of high school; in fact, the plan for me to continue my education had been put in place long before I was even born.

Granddaddy, my mother’s father, always wanted to be a doctor. He had the brains for it too; all his teachers said so. I remember my sister and me playing this game with him: one of us would get a calculator, the other would call out numbers and operations. “Nineteen plus 382, minus 44, times three...” The one with the calculator would compute the equation while Granddaddy did it mentally, scratching an occasional detail on his notepad. Granddaddy always got it right. Sometimes he even beat the calculator.

But Granddaddy never finished college because life took some unfortunate turns for his family. Granddaddy made the only choice he felt he could at that time: He went to work, earning money to pay tuition for his sisters so that they could complete their teaching degrees. “You girls got to get your education,” he must have said to them as he said a generation later to my mother and even later to my sister and to me. “These days, men can always get work, but you girls will need a college degree to get a good paying job.”

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

Though I found it sad that Granddaddy missed going to college, I loved hearing him tell the story. I loved watching his face glow as he told of his sisters getting their degrees and my mother getting hers. At those times, I glimpsed true joy, the joy that comes from giving freely, loving completely. And I knew, too, that I was an heir to Granddaddy’s sacrificial promise. He had created a legacy of hope.

Perhaps the Jews of the exile were not hanging out at Nebuchadnezzar High discussing future co-eds with their Babylonian buddies. Still, I bet those who listened to this promise from God, felt somewhat as I did every time I heard the plans my Granddaddy had made for me. I bet their hearts quickened at the thought of God preparing for their “welfare and not for [their] harm,” of their “future of hope.” Can’t you just picture their faces as they listened to the story? Look into their eyes. Watch as awareness dawns, “This promise is for me. Me!” One by one, they sense the real message— “God. God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God. Loves. Me.”

The promise holds. The future is secure. Let us rejoice always.



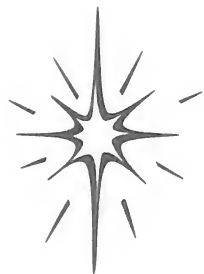
JOY

WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 16

Jeremiah 29:11-14
1 Thessalonians 5:16

Aileen Lawrimore

Student
School of Divinity



JOY

THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 17

Psalm 46
1 Peter 1:3-9

Eddie Stepp

Associate Professor
of Religious Studies

My 15-year-old daughter boarded a plane yesterday for India. She went with a local ministry to spend 2 weeks at an orphanage, playing with kids and passing out Christmas gifts. For the last several years, she has been developing a heart for mission work, identifying particularly with children. I was not surprised, therefore, when she approached her mother and me this summer about the possibility of making this trip.

As her father, though, I confess that I am torn. On one hand, I am proud of this young woman who has a growing desire for the things of God and who is sensitive to the leading and direction of the Lord. On the other hand, I am a father who values my family and our times together, especially at holidays. For 15 years I have anticipated her excitement on Christmas morning, whether she was excited about the wrapping paper (much younger), books (somewhat younger), or money (more recently). This year I will anticipate her excitement again, though it will be from 8000 miles away.

So here I am, a week before Christmas, and my firstborn is halfway around the world. It will be the first celebration of the Incarnation of our family when we will not all be together, and I am to think about JOY?! Forgive me if I find it less than ironic that both passages for today's reading speak to my situation. While my days are not as tumultuous and uncertain as the

psalmist experienced, the wisdom of the author still resonates. The reminder is this: God is our refuge and strength in uncertain times – and in that reality, there is joy! While the empty spot around our tree this year pales in comparison with the trials experienced by Peter's audience, I still need the reassurance that Peter provides. His encouragement is this: my joy, which he describes as inexpressible and glorious, is not based on my circumstances but on the reality of Jesus Christ.

"The Lord Almighty is with us," the psalmist declares. Indeed, he is with us—Immanuel. He is with me, even when one I love follows the call of God to a foreign land. He is with you, through loss, through disease, through pain and uncertainty. He is with us, even when the earth shakes and it seems that our world is going to plunge into the abyss. And when that reality—Immanuel—captures our hearts and captivates our perspective, we can know joy regardless of the circumstances. May you know God's great joy in these days because God is with us.

I am writing these thoughts on the 1-year anniversary of my husband's sudden death from a heart attack. If you had told me then, on the most sorrowful day of my life, that I would spend part of this day a year later writing about the experience of joy, I would have had difficulty believing that I would ever be capable of feeling joyful again.

I read the passage from Isaiah 51:9-11 as a cry for God to exert power and strength to restore joy to the sorrowful. The text does not ask, it demands, that the arm of God wake up and fix a painful situation. I felt a similar desperation in those first days and weeks after Sid's death. I knew that grief was a process and researchers had written about various stages of that process. What I didn't realize until experiencing intense grief myself was how overwhelming the physical, mental, and spiritual pain something so benignly referred to as a "process" could be. Many people who had experienced loss reached out to me. Time and again, I asked, sometimes begged, these people who had started on their grief journeys before me to tell me what to do. The pain was so intense that I imagined there must be some way to wake up from it and do something that would enable me to experience joy again.

During that time, a dear friend gave me a magnet for my refrigerator reading, "Friends are God's way of taking care of us." My friends and family certainly played a huge role in helping me to experience healing. Primarily, they did not do this by trying to answer the question

of what I should do. Instead, they helped the most when they were willing to allow me to experience grief in my own particular way and in my own particular time. My friends allowed me to cry, to remember, and eventually, to laugh again by being present with me without trying to fix an unfixable situation. As much as people who knew and loved me before Sid's death helped me, many who didn't know me at all also reached out with care and concern. Some of these people have become dear friends and I often think of how Sid would have delighted in their friendship as I do. Others came into my life briefly over the past year, with words and deeds that reminded me that I was part of a larger community.

It is this community of fellow human beings, loving and caring for one another, that I am reminded of in the second reading for today, Ephesians 2:14-17. In this passage, we are reminded that Jesus' life was about creating peace among us, breaking down barriers that make us feel separate from one another. At times in my grief, I retreated into myself and felt very much alone. I was helped through these times by loving people who reached across barriers – barriers created by discomfort in talking about death, by not knowing of the "right" thing to say or do, or of wondering if they knew me well enough to say or do anything.

During this season, I encourage you to reach across barriers that separate you from others so that we all might feel the joy of God's community.

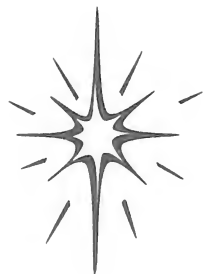


FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 18

Isaiah 51:9-11
Ephesians 5:14-17

Sydney Brown

Assistant Professor of Education



JOY

SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 19

Psalm 149:1-9
Ephesians 5:18-19

Scott Shauf

Assistant Professor
of Religious Studies

One of my favorite hymns to sing during Advent has always been “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” It’s solemn, almost mournful—yet joyful—tune seems to me to capture the spirit of the season nigh perfectly. The first stanza acknowledges that things are not going so well right now: “O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.”

The people of God are captive, in exile, in a mournful state. Yet immediately comes the refrain: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

The joy that is enjoined upon us is over a certainty of what God will do in the future. It’s based on what we look forward to, not on what has already happened. For Israel, this meant the certainty of God’s literal redemption, of being brought from exile and foreign domination back to the promised land, back to the peace and certainty of God’s rule rather than the suffering of Babylon’s rule.

So, too, for us. During Advent we rejoice not because things are going well for us right now, not because all our ducks are in a row and we’ve got all of our bills and debts paid off and we have nothing to do but eat, drink, and be merry. No, most of us are all too aware of our own shortcomings and the shortcomings of those around us and perhaps the pressure of our jobs, the economy, our family needs, deaths of loved ones, and maybe other things we can’t even name. The joy we experience during Advent

is not based on the here-and-now, but on the certainty that whatever our circumstances, whatever our sins and burdens, God is going to visit us and redeem us. That’s good news. That’s cause for singing for joy on our beds, as Psalm 149:5 puts it.

It’s probably easier for us than it was for the people of Israel, because we know in fact that Christ has already come. The Advent season requires us to use our imagination a bit in this regard. For the weeks leading up to Christmas we’re supposed to think as if Christ’s coming is something to look forward to rather than a past event to celebrate. That’s hard, or at least it is for me. It would be much easier just to skip to the baby in the manger. But in another sense, we do still look forward to Christ’s coming—to his future coming in power, when not only we ourselves, but also “creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). There is still a true Advent, a future redemption, for Christians to wait for. And we wait with joy, a joy that comes from our certainty of the future and not from our present circumstances. This joy is produced by the firm hope that our present afflictions will be replaced by “an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Corinthians 4:17). That’s the joy of Advent. The psalmist stated the reason for such joy perfectly (149:4):

For the LORD takes pleasure in his people;
He will beautify the afflicted ones with
salvation.

At the beginning of his gospel, Luke tells the story of the birth of John the Baptist. As with several couples in the Old Testament, Zechariah and Elizabeth, a pious couple of strong family lineage, are unable to have children and are getting on in years. While Zechariah, a priest, is serving in the temple, he is visited by an angelic messenger from God, who tells him that his wife will indeed conceive and have a son, and that they are to name their son John. What is more, this son will be “filled with the Holy Spirit” and “make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” When Zechariah expresses doubt, the angel causes Zechariah to lose his speech.

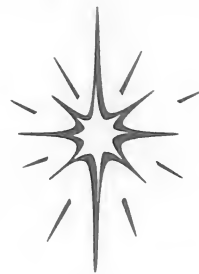
Later, Elizabeth indeed gives birth to a baby boy. Eight days after the delivery, Elizabeth and Zechariah gather with friends and family to circumcise and name this miracle child. All assume that he will be named after his father; when they ask Zechariah, however, Zechariah, in obedience to the angel’s command, writes that the child is to be named John. Immediately Zechariah regains his ability to speak, and immediately he begins to praise God for this miracle baby. Zechariah prophesies that the salvation of Israel has arrived, and that God’s promises to Abraham are now being fulfilled.

Significantly, an object of Zechariah’s praise is God’s rescue of Israel, so that the people “might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.” Equally as significant, Zechariah prophesies that this

child, John, will go before the one who will himself rescue the people and prepare them for his coming.

Later in the narrative, John is imprisoned by Herod Antipas. From prison he sends messengers to ask Jesus if he is the one whom the people have been expecting. After confirming that he is indeed the one, Jesus speaks of John to the crowd, explaining that John was the messenger sent by God ahead of Jesus. In doing so, Jesus refers to Malachi 3:1-5. In this passage, the prophet speaks of one who will go before the Lord in preparation of the Lord’s coming, and that God is coming to purify a people for himself, that they might “present offerings to the LORD in righteousness,” offerings which will be “pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old.”

Advent is indeed a time of preparation. And it is a time of preparation for a purpose. We prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ, God himself, and we prepare by purifying ourselves that we might present to him an offering that is pleasing to him. Our offering is one of service, a service pleasing to the Lord. When Zechariah’s days of silence were finally over, his first words were words of obedience and praise. May we, too, enjoy times of silent meditation on our blessed Savior, times of preparing ourselves through purification for acts of pleasing, obedient service to him.



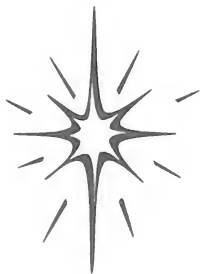
LOVE

SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 20

Malachi 3:1-40
Luke 1:68-79

James McConnell

Assistant Professor of
New Testament Interpretation
School of Divinity



LOVE

MONDAY,
DECEMBER 21

Psalm 126
Philippians 1:3-11

Tammy Hoyle

Assistant Professor of Mathematics
Chair of the Department of
Mathematical Sciences

Like millions of Americans, I have enjoyed using the social networking website Facebook to find and communicate with many dear friends and family members. Although I'm fascinated by the various and sundry applications that are offered, I have opted out of most except the correspondence tools that allow me to interact with those who have been deemed as "friends." Quite simply, I like to read what people are saying and occasionally add my two cents worth. Often this involves a word of encouragement to someone who is struggling with one of life's many challenges.

I found this to be the case recently as I began communicating with my first cousin. Gary, a few years younger than me, is a wonderful Christian guy committed to the Lord, his wife, and three terrific young boys. The busyness of life had caused us to lose touch. I knew he was having health issues, but as we began our communication through Facebook, I discovered the seriousness of it all. Gary suffers from a rare condition called cataplexy. Individuals with this condition find themselves suddenly and unexpectedly collapsing and losing all control of muscles throughout the entire body. Episodes can last a few minutes or a few hours. Gary shared with me that he has had episodes at home, in church, on the ball field, etc. A normal life is foreign to him and his family. Even worse, the medicines that are used for treatment have such serious side effects that additional

challenges are created. As I write this, Gary is scheduled to see a specialist in California. We are praying that the Lord will allow this to be his time for healing.

I have appreciated the opportunity to reconnect with Gary and to express my support and love for him and his family. During difficult times as these, we yearn for the comfort offered through close friends and family members. Most of all, we yearn for the peace that only the Lord can provide. Like the captives in Psalm 126, we may, in times of great despair pray for the Lord to "restore our fortunes" and "return our songs of joy."

As we celebrate the birth of our Redeemer, let's pray that He will use us as a conduit of his love and encouragement to others. Perhaps in this process, we will reconnect with a loved one. Or better still we will reconnect with The One who shows us how to love. No form of social networking could compare with this!

A friend and colleague was referring to another colleague and she said, “someone needs to tell him it is not about him.” In our lives there is always the temptation to think that it is about us. John the Baptist had reasons to think it was about him. After all, he did have a special calling, but when his disciples asked him about Jesus’ baptizing (and drawing the crowds), he quickly explained his role to them.

“He must increase, but I must decrease” was John’s reply. Think about what it would mean if each of us viewed Jesus this way. Of course, if asked, our canned answer would be that we believe this. However, a more personal question might be whether we lived that way.

Advent themes include love, joy, hope, and peace. Take a look at these in the context of Jesus increasing while we decrease. This could mean that I have to love more even when I thought I was justified in hating. A pastor once said that God commands us to love, not to like. If Jesus increases in my life, I need to love people as he did.

Would not this attitude produce more joy in our lives as we see others respond to the love of God showing in our lives? Hate can be an internal force which can corrupt us. If we say that we hate, then we do not show love. Yet, we are probably more guilty of not caring about many than we are of hate. A loving attitude

would gradually give us hope about matters in general. God does not expect us to solve all the problems or save the world. But, what if all 300, 400, or 500 members of a church showed true Christian love in the community? If each member reached out to love one or two people, the impact would be tremendous.

One thing we might have to give is time. If it is about us, we use our time to satisfy our desires. If it is about Jesus, we may need to give more time to purposefully love others. Some years ago a local radio host read a poem entitled “A Cup of Tea.” It was about a man going to visit a lonely elderly woman at Christmas. The poem showed her joy at his visit and the opportunity to share a cup of tea. At Christmas we can all share love in many ways. Perhaps a simple cup of tea would be a good beginning in showing concern and love to someone. If I ask the trite question, “What Would Jesus Do,” the answer would be that he would show love. Thus, as He increases in our lives, we should show love.



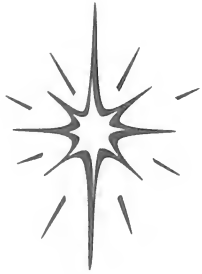
LOVE

TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 22

Isaiah 13:6-13
John 3:22-30

Barry Hambright

Professor of History and Political
Science



LOVE

WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 23

Psalm 25:1-10
Luke 1:39-45

Steve Varley

Vice President for Development

In Christ's coming to this world, a supernatural event occurred. Fundamentally, the way God sees sin would be forever changed. For the Christian, we acknowledge this first, but the development of faith and a spiritual practice should look also at the natural example of how Christ dealt with sin. The Psalmist wrote: "Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me."

Christ's way of dealing with sin and difficulties is instructive. Jesus had a path, a vision, that sustained Him through the most trying times, and though his humanity questioned and hurt, His Godliness pushed aside doubt, found purpose in every action, and refused to be victimized by trying circumstances.

How then should I approach difficulty? Options that promise comfort, convenience, and mindlessness surround me. One of the great paradoxes of existence is that the pursuit of pleasure and convenience leads to great woe and the gross inability to deal with inconvenience. Addiction, codependency, consumerism (and its consequence, credit problems), dysfunctional relationships, hurtful behavior and speech—each of these are expressions of a pursuit of the supposedly inalienable right to be happy. To some extent each one of these are a part of everyone's life, each one a difficulty, and each one is a consequence of sin.

Christ's path provides an example for dealing with difficulties, through the practical, ordinary method He demonstrated in His life. His vision

sustained Him and gave Him a long-term perspective that revealed the insincerity of the church's practice, and lent His teaching power. Meaning and authenticity trump ritual and thoughtless repetition.

Christ was never a victim. He accepted difficulty and obstacles, and found a way. His presence defined the moment (even a new era for the world) instead of the moment defining Him. My budo teacher Patrick Augé explains it like this: solution mode is to instantly look for an answer and find a way, in contrast to the subtly poisonous thoughts that arise and cast me as the main actor in a dramatic, self-victimized role. "Why me?" or "things would be so much better if only..." or "if it weren't for this person I would..."

And yet it is impossible to develop this approach while at the same time pursuing convenience, since that is the pursuit of the easy, least difficult, and most comfortable path. Accepting minor inconveniences trains me to deal with the major difficulties when they arise. Then at least I will stand a chance of going into solution mode when the difficulties come, when I encounter obstacles, and when things change.

That is how I have been taught, and how I study Jesus' ministry today. Thank God for the extraordinary dimension of salvation, but to find the no less important ordinary dimension of salvation requires some work on my part.

Has it been your experience, like it has been my own, that fear and excitement often run together in life? If so, then we're in good company. For in the story of Jesus' birth, once the details are stated about who is king and governor, who lives in what town, who has to go where to be counted and to pay their taxes, who delivers a newborn baby, and that shepherds were working late at night in the fields, an angel of the Lord suddenly appears! And there you have it—both fear and excitement!

That's just about how it happens, isn't it? Right in the midst of the ordinary things of life, the extraordinary happens. Of course, sometimes an extraordinary event like this one needs a few words of explanation. So the angel speaks: "Be not afraid!" "Fear not!" he says. You've got to be kidding, right? I mean, every other time in Scripture when the "glory of the Lord" shines, people are shocked nearly senseless! Nine months earlier, when the angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will have a baby, she is "greatly troubled." Several thousand years before when the Lord appeared to Moses, he practically has his shoes knocked from his feet. In the Book of Revelation, worshipers fall down in God's presence and throw off their crowns. When Isaiah caught just a glimpse of the Lord's robe in the Temple, the doorposts and Isaiah himself begin to shake. Then Isaiah cries, "Woe is me... I am ruined." Later, when the Lord appeared to Saul as a "light from heaven flashed," Saul fell to the ground blinded. No wonder the angel

needed to rescue the shepherds with words about "good news" and "great joy." Had he not done so, they would likely have fainted or ran away.

Yes, this angelic visitation on the very first Christmas Eve was just the sort of thing to strike fear in every heart. Who would not want to run away? But let's not run too fast! If we will but wait a little bit longer, things will come clearly into focus. All of these happenings are pointing to "good news of a great joy which will come to all the people"—even to us.

Does that kind of news unsettle or surprise you like it does me? Well it ought to! For Christmas Eve is a day to remember that God has decisively broken into our world. Today brings with it both fear and excitement because God has chosen this very Eve to do something for us that we cannot do for ourselves. God has chosen tonight to bring His Son into the world to make right a whole lot of wrong done in our lives.

So, let's all join together doing something we may not ordinarily do on Christmas Eve. Let's bow our heads, listen to our hearts, and fall on our knees in fearful joy to our God who receives our confession and who forgives our sins. What a night! What a gift! What a God!



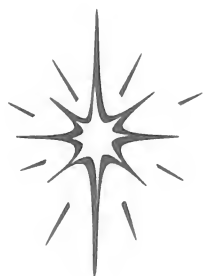
LOVE

THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 24

Isaiah 59:15b-21
Luke 2:1-20

Robert Canoy

Dean and Professor of Christian
Theology, School of Divinity



LOVE

FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 25

Isaiah 52:7-10
John 1:1-5

Frank Bonner

President of the University

The recently refurbished Hubble telescope has sent back to earth images of celestial objects that are magnificent in their beauty and awesome in the immensity they represent—millions of light-years in distance, thousands of light-years in dimension, thousands of degrees in temperature, and traveling through space at incredible speeds. Not only religious leaders but some scientists as well have reacted in religious terms with references to spirituality and the awesomeness of God's creation. Even without the benefit of these marvelous images, the Psalmist recognized the majesty of creation—"You have set the majesty above the heavens" (Psalm 8)—and wondered, "When I look at your heavens...what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"

How indeed do we relate to the Psalmist's question? Are we intimidated and frightened, or comforted and reassured?

As we contemplate the immensity and majesty of God's "heavens," we must remember that our Savior was—and is—behind it all: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1).

Rather than frighten and intimidate us, the immensity of God's creation reassures us. If we could ask God just why he created a universe so far beyond our comprehension, perhaps his answer would be, "Because I can."

We are not to be intimidated but comforted that the creator with such awesome power loves us in a way more than equal to the majesty of his creation—enough to send his only begotten son to die on the cross so that we may have salvation and eternal life.

This image shows a single page of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper appears to be from a notebook or a standard sheet of stationery. There is no handwriting or other markings on the page.



Gardner-Webb University at a Glance

- Gardner-Webb is a private, Baptist-related university located in the Piedmont region of North Carolina
- We serve nearly 4,000 students from over 39 states and 21 foreign countries
- In addition to 45 major programs of study in our undergraduate division, Gardner-Webb offers a Graduate School, a Graduate School of Business, and a Divinity School, which together enroll over 1,200 students
- Our 130+ full-time faculty (15:1 student-to-faculty ratio) are teacher-scholars who help foster meaningful dialogue, critical analysis, and spiritual challenge within a diverse community of learning
- Gardner-Webb has been honored by U.S. News and World Report magazine as one of America's best colleges
- Gardner-Webb fields 21 NCAA Division I athletic teams as a member of the Big South and Northeast Conferences
- More than 90 percent of Gardner-Webb students receive financial aid in the form of grants, loans, scholarships, or work-study positions
- Students seeking leadership opportunities can participate in almost 40 different professional, religious, or social organizations on campus
- Gardner-Webb features active chapters of at least 10 national honor societies in such academic disciplines as Biology, Spanish, English, French, Psychology, Religious Studies and Theology, and Nursing

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